

Culture Is King at Arts Festival; Lowell Controversy Mars Event

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The White House was transformed into a spectacular showcase of culture yesterday for more than 300 invited guests who sat through a 12-hour parade of American achievement in the arts.

Sparked by an energetic Lady Bird Johnson, who stayed with it all the way, the White House Festival of the Arts provided a smattering of everything from pop art to jazz, from poetry readings to ballet, and, for seasoning, a dash of controversy.

The last was contributed by a man who wasn't there—poet Robert Lowell, who declined his invitation in protest over American foreign policy. Lowell's shadow hung over the otherwise sunny gathering, taking form in the remarks of some of the Festival's most notable participants, among them John Hersey, George Kennan, Mark Van Doren, Dwight McDonald and Phyllis McGinley.

Big Names Absent

While the guest list included some of the most distinguished persons in their fields, there was a noticeable emphasis on museum and orchestra directors from smaller cities across the country, and an absence of the bigger names in prose and poetry.

The White House, working with limited space, was apparently striving for a national consensus of creativity

rather than a concentrated list of high-powered names.

President Johnson made only one appearance, during an evening reception the White House South Lawn. While making no reference to the Lowell affair, the President said that the arts are an integral part of governmental policy.

"Stimulate Creation"

"The Presidency is not just a center of moral leadership," he said. "We are—for example—using this great power to help move toward justice for all our people—not, simply because I believe it, although I do—but because American freedom depends on it. And we are trying to stimulate creation—not because of our personal tastes or desires—but because American greatness will rest on it."

"This is the true meaning of this occasion. Those of you who are participating in this day are not simply sharing an isolated event. You are sharing in an effort to enrich the life of this country and its people."

Mr. Johnson said that while art is not "a political weapon" much of what the artist does is "profoundly political" because he helps dissolve barriers of hatred and ignorance. "In this way you work toward peace—not the peace which is simply the absence of war—but the peace which liberates man to reach for the finest fulfillment of his spirit."

The role of the artist was a recurring theme through the day. It was touched on earlier by Mrs. Johnson, who said, "There would be nothing for the rest of us to sup-

port if a very few did not make the personal sacrifices necessary for the arduous act of creativeness."

At a noon luncheon in the garden court of the National Gallery of Art, George F. Kennan, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, said that artists are often responsible for the gap between the arts and the public.

Assailing obscurity for obscurity's sake, Kennan deplored the "indelicacies of exhibitionism, of sensation hunting, of cheap trickery" committed by people "who claim the privileges of the artist's position without ever having really accepted the discipline of the art."

Plea for Tolerance

"He appealed for forbearance on both sides—from society, which must learn to accept the 'eccentricities' of the artist, and from the artist who must realize that art is 'not just the creation of an object of beauty . . . but also the communication of feelings and insights to other people.'"

Kennan failed to deliver an added portion of his prepared address, distributed earlier to some members of the press, in which he rationalized the right of the artist to be heard on national issues—in obvious reference to Lowell.

The White House later issued a statement in Kennan's behalf saying there was no

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time in the schedule for additional remarks.

The Lowell controversy bobbed through the corridors and into the performance rooms despite efforts by the Festival planners to play it down. Although some of the guests and participants were eager to make clear that their appearance was not a repudiation of one of their colleagues, they nonetheless were restrained in making their feelings known.

John Hersey, before reading a passage from "Hiroshima," said, "I read this one . . . on behalf of the great number of citizens who have become alarmed in recent weeks by the sight of fire begetting fire . . . We cannot for a moment forget the truly tremendous danger in these times of

of accident, of reliance not on moral strength but on mere military power . . ."

Phyllis McGinley, reading from a ten-year old poem "In Praise of Diversity," substituted this stanza:

Applaud both dreams and commonsense,

Born equal; then with all our power,

Let us, for once, praise Presidents

Providing Dream its festival hour,

And while the pot of culture's bubblesome,

Praise poets, even when they're troublesome

Mark Van Doren, introducing the prose and poetry readings, said that while Lowell may or may not have been correct, he (Van Doren) honors the scruple of a fine poet, who, in his own terms, was

'conscience-bound' to stay away."

Dwight McDonald, the peppy writer for Esquire and the New Yorker, circulated a petition during the day saying, "We share Mr. Lowell's dismay at our country's recent action in Viet-Nam and the Dominican Republic."

Of the 20 writers who signed a telegram endorsing Lowell's stand, only McDonald was invited to the Festival. He said he had accepted as "the bad fairy who comes to the christening."